

Rep. Peter Welch delivered the following commencement speech at Green Mountain College's graduation exercises Saturday, May 16:

Good morning. Thank you, President Fonteyn for your kind introduction and your gracious invitation. Members of the board of trustees, faculty members, parents, students, community members and - most importantly - graduates: thank you for being here and thank you for hosting me.

[Click here to read the speech in full.](#)

To the Class of 2009: Congratulations.

Today is your day - your day to celebrate a remarkable achievement, your day to reflect upon the journey that brought you to this moment, and your day to launch the next great chapter of your lives. Thank you for including me in this most extraordinary moment and for sharing this day - your day - with me.

As you leave Poultney today with diploma in hand, you will enter a world vastly different from the world faced by last year's Green Mountain College graduates. In the span of a single year, the changes we have witnessed in this country and in this world have been of a magnitude few could have anticipated.

In a single year, we saw many of our nation's most powerful and seemingly most stable institutions crumble under their own weight and tumble to the ground like a house of cards - Lehman Brothers, Chrysler, Washington Mutual, AIG. We saw our government take action of an unprecedented scope - propping up the banking system, stimulating our economy with a \$750 billion investment and even taking ownership stakes in car manufacturers. We saw the ripple effects of this crisis spread from Wall Street and Washington to every town and city in this country - and, indeed, to every country in the world. We saw friends and neighbors right here in Poultney and throughout Vermont losing their jobs, struggling to pay the bills and wondering when our economy would stabilize.

In this same year, as the giants of finance and industry fell to their knees and as layoff after layoff resulted in joblessness for nearly one in ten Americans, we found ourselves witnessing another phenomenon - equal in magnitude but opposite in tone.

It can only be described as a resurgence of hope and a belief in our ability to change our world for the better.

In a single year, we saw a disaffected electorate awake from its collective slumber and become engaged in the democratic process once again. We saw our country reject cynicism and fear and instead embrace hope and a sincere desire for change. We saw a break from the tradition of kicking our most difficult problems down the road - and a recognition that the only way we can right our country is to address those challenges head-on.

Class of 2009, there is no question that as you leave here today you face a nation and a world in transition. The uncertainties before you are greater than you might have anticipated when you matriculated - uncertainties about how you might find a job this troubled economy and how you might pay off the student loans you've accrued these past four years. But you are also entering a world that is ready to be influenced by you, that is ripe to be reshaped by you and that, frankly, is in great need of your contributions.

At Green Mountain College, you have learned what it means to be agents of change. For the past few years, you have immersed yourself in a community that prides itself not on clinging to the ways of the past, but on striving at all times to improve one's self and become a better force in this world. Your professors have taught you to reject the status quo, your classmates have challenged you to see the world through a different set of eyes, and your college has given you the tools you need to succeed.

During your years at Green Mountain College, your focus on understanding the environment in which you live has given you a leg up in this new world. In Washington, many of my colleagues are only just starting to understand the threat posed to our world by a changing climate. They are only just starting to understand the vital importance of living sustainably and responsibly. And they are only just starting to recognize the tremendous economic opportunity available to those who face the climate crisis head-on.

To you, this is old news. For the past four years, you have internalized a philosophy espoused by our great conservationist president, Teddy Roosevelt.

He said, "I recognize the right and duty of this generation to develop and use the natural resources of our land; but I do not recognize the right to waste them, or to rob, by wasteful use, the generations that come after us."

In your coursework, you have learned the science of climate change, you have learned the ideals of environmental responsibility, you have learned the merits of public service and you have learned the importance of acting locally while thinking globally. But you have not simply sequestered yourself in a dusty library or at the top of an ivory tower. Instead, you have avoided passive learning in favor of active participation in your immediate surroundings.

Through the Farm & Food program, you have learned about the importance of local agriculture by growing your own food, forging relationships with Vermont farmers, and stocking your cafeteria with locally-grown produce. You have made your mark on campus with student-initiated projects: creating a "green bike" program, making your library more energy efficient, and restoring a healthy tree canopy to the campus. You have contributed to the Town of Poultney by enhancing the environmental curriculum in local classrooms and hosting environmental activities for local students.

Beyond your individual contributions to sustainability, you have pushed Green Mountain College as a whole to practice what it preaches. In 2006, GMC committed to buying half of its electricity from Vermont farms through the Cow Power Program - reducing carbon emissions by the equivalent of taking 758 passenger cars off the road for a year. GMC became the first in Vermont to sign the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment and pledged to become carbon neutral by 2011. This would make it one of the first colleges in the country to take this tremendously important step.

Perhaps the most exciting evidence of your contribution to sustainability is the woodchip biomass plant which President Fonteyn has committed to putting online by winter 2010. This student-initiated cogeneration facility will heat the campus while producing 20 percent of the school's electricity - all with locally-harvested woodchips. Not only will this ambitious project replace fossil fuels with a sustainable resource, it will encourage the growth of the emerging

woodchip market and save Green Mountain College \$250,000 a year in heating costs.

In your years at Green Mountain College, you have demonstrated just how much you can reshape your own environment to reflect your priorities. You have shown that it is entirely possible to influence your surroundings and create the world in which you hope to live.

Certainly, you have had a number of distinct advantages during your time here. Your work has been supported by an enthusiastic administration, an enlightened faculty, a driven student body and - most importantly - your parents and family members who have encouraged you and enabled you to succeed.

When you leave Poultney and Green Mountain College, you will find that the gears of change are often more difficult to turn - that institutional inertia and fear of change can be difficult forces to overcome.

Nothing illustrates this reality better than the negotiations taking place right now in Congress around the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009. This bill, which would reduce carbon emissions nearly 20 percent by 2020 and just over 80 percent by 2050, undoubtedly would be considered a modest effort by many in this audience. Its goals of increasing energy efficiency, modernizing the electric grid, expanding electric vehicle production and achieving a renewable energy standard of 25 percent would appear to many of us to be simple common sense.

But even though the science of climate change is irrefutable - even though the economic promise of responding to it is clear - this bill faces steep resistance and an uphill climb. Despite the fact that we live in a world of great transformation - an era in which 'no we can't' has been replaced by 'yes we can' - progress comes slowly, and only with the collective efforts of many people.

And that, of course, is where you come in.

You've learned in your years at Green Mountain College - in your years of tackling difficult and

seemingly intractable challenges - that it is not enough to identify a problem and that it is not enough to settle on a goal. The true test is whether you have the skills and the discipline to implement that goal.

We are witnessing this reality in Washington as we speak. The long-running debate about the science of climate change has, thankfully, come to a close. The debate about what goals our nation should set for itself to fight climate change is ongoing - and will take the collective efforts of many reasonable people to achieve consensus. But when those goals are settled upon - and I hope they will be soon - the true test of implementation will still remain.

The challenge of implementing a post-carbon energy policy will be a mighty one, requiring diligent work, true persistence and tremendous motivation.

This challenge is your generation's greatest responsibility and - truth be told - it is your generation's greatest opportunity.

I know many of you face the seemingly paralyzing uncertainty of not knowing where you will go from here - how you will find a job and how you will pay the bills. But I hope you recognize the opportunity present in the global climate challenge. I hope you recognize that the skills you have acquired at Green Mountain College are not only what will be required to implement a post-carbon energy policy - but they are also what will be required for you to prosper during these difficult economic times. Because, as we work our way out of this recession - as we invest in our economy and invest in our future - we will need engineers, builders, physicists, architects and educators.

I am confident that, in this very audience, are the future teachers, scientists, policy-makers and entrepreneurs who will guide us toward the energy future we require. I believe that in this audience are those who will, as President Obama said in his inaugural address, "harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories." I know that you will find new, sustainable methods of heating our homes and buildings, that you will show us how to transport ourselves around the globe without warming its atmosphere, and that you will discover how we can reverse the destructive course we have traveled for so long.

Thank you for allowing me to be here today to share this moment with you. Even more, thank

you for continuing to inspire me and my colleagues to do the important work that is required of us. Most of all, I wish you tremendous luck in facing the challenges before you and in finding the success you have earned.

Thank you.